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We Don't Count: The Invisibility of Teaching Librarians in Statistics on Academic Instructional Labor

Abstract

[Excerpt] The field of library and information science (LIS) has seen a tremendous growth of interest and activity in postsecondary library instruction since the American Library Association Presidential Committee on Information Literacy released its Final Report in 1989. In subsequent decades, academic libraries and librarians moved beyond traditional bibliographic instruction (BI) to embrace the pursuit of information literacy (IL), despite a historical skepticism of librarians' place within a teaching domain traditionally reserved by disciplinary faculty in the postsecondary setting. Libraries' centering of the IL mission has been accompanied by librarians' turn to library instruction as one vehicle for pursuing it. However, a collective oversight in measuring our teaching workforce has distinguished academic librarianship's uneasy and precarious cohabitation of a domain increasingly beset by labor strife.

Keywords

library and information science, instruction, postsecondary education, information literacy

Disciplines

Higher Education | Information Literacy | Other Education

Comments

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CHAPTER 19

We Don't Count

The Invisibility of Teaching Librarians in Statistics on Academic Instructional Labor

Aliqae Geraci

THE FIELD OF LIBRARY and information science (LIS) has seen a tremendous growth of interest and activity in postsecondary library instruction since the American Library Association Presidential Committee on Information Literacy released its Final Report in 1989.¹ In subsequent decades, academic libraries and librarians moved beyond traditional bibliographic instruction (BI) to embrace the pursuit of information literacy (IL), despite a historical skepticism of librarians' place within a teaching domain traditionally reserved by disciplinary faculty in the postsecondary setting.² Libraries' centering of the IL mission has been accompanied by librarians' turn to library instruction as one vehicle for pursuing it. However, a collective oversight in measuring our teaching workforce has distinguished academic librarianship's uneasy and precarious cohabitation of a domain increasingly beset by labor strife.

Trends in library instruction have been richly documented by professional organizations as well as the federal government. LOEX studies of academic library BI spanning 1979–1995 documented an increase in institutionally required BI in the 1980s that held steady through the 1990s.³ Library instruction sessions of the 125 members of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) jumped 81 percent between 1991 and 2011,⁴ while the much larger dataset collected by the National Center of Education Statistics (NCES) showed a 24

percent increase in the number of group sessions in academic libraries from FY 2000 to FY 2012.⁵

During roughly the same period that library instruction swelled, the higher education sector developed fissures in the structures of academic labor. A decades-long decline in tenure-line faculty (from 45 percent to 24 percent, 1975–2011) and increase in contingent instructors (from 55 percent to 76 percent during the same period)^{*} paralleled the explosion in postsecondary enrollment[†] and skyrocketing costs. A greater portion and total majority of the teaching functions of the university are now being performed by non-tenure-track staff, who are compensated less, are afforded lower status, and receive less support from their institutions.⁶

As the presence of non-tenure-track postsecondary instructors multiplied parallel to library instruction, academic librarians began to build and participate in their own instruction-specific networks. Institutions like ACRL Immersion, LOEX conferences, national and regional committees, Listservs, and countless continuing education opportunities provided venues for teaching librarians to discuss and develop pedagogy and collaborate on research.⁷ The growth of library instruction sessions and related training and organizations characterize the development of teaching librarianship as an established subspecialty. Within the larger context of changing academic workforces, it would be tempting to assume that while the numbers of academic librarians have increased modestly since FY 2000 (a little over 4 percent),⁸ a greater proportion of these librarians have teaching duties.[‡]

A cursory review of professional literature on library instruction reveals an implicit assumption that in addition to shifting expectations, there are also

* Contingent workforce counts include graduate student employees, via AAUP Research Office, "Trends in Instructional Staff Employment Status, 1975–2011," American Association of University Professors, March 20, 2013, http://www.aaup.org/file/Instructional_Staff_Trends.pdf.

† A 34 percent increase between 1970 and 1984, and 76 percent increase between 1985 and 2012, according to "Fast Facts: Postsecondary Enrollment Rates," National Center for Education Statistics, 2015, <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=98>.

‡ A brief review of ACRL and section memberships in ACRL Annual Reports from 2011 to 2014, located at "Annual Reports," Association of College and Research Libraries, accessed September 3, 2015, <http://www.ala.org/acrl/aboutacrl/annualreports>, shows a 13.5 percent increase in Instruction Section (IS) personal memberships between 2002 and 2014, compared with an ACRL increase of 2.1 percent. However, IS membership actually declined 5.7 percent since 2009, compared with a 7.5 percent decline for ACRL during the same period, and IS as a percentage of ACRL showed a consistent but modest increase from 32.6 percent (2002) to 35.5 percent (2009) to 36.2 percent (2014). To establish how well these numbers represent the academic library teaching workforce, additional research would be needed to determine how many IS members actually teach, as teaching duties are not a requirement of section membership. It is also likely that many academic teaching librarians are not members of IS or ACRL.

more librarians who teach. Unfortunately, the two most common ways of supporting or examining this function⁹—longitudinal data documenting sessions hosted and attendee count, or content analysis assessing changes to required skills for academic librarians¹⁰—do not adequately measure the growth of this sub-occupational grouping over time.

Recent changes to established data collection practices signal academic libraries' persistent disconnect from the larger higher educational framework for tracking professional and instructional labor. The NCES Library Statistics Program collected U.S. academic library data through the separate Academic Libraries Survey (ALS), and beginning in 2014–15, as part of the larger Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). The ALS collected institution-level library instruction data for session (“information services to groups”) and attendee counts. The ALS also collected FTE (full-time equivalent) counts of librarians, non-librarian professional staff, and staff for each institution, along with student assistants. While no differentiations were made for different types of librarians, librarians were counted separately from non-librarian professionals also working in the library.

As part of the IPEDS integration, collection of academic library instruction data was terminated, including session and attendee counts of “information services to groups” as well as questions that identified IL in institutional success outcomes.¹¹ Institution-level personnel data is still tracked, but FTE was discontinued in favor of head counts. The integration also coincided with the IPEDS transition to Standard Occupational Codes (SOCs)[§] for classifying academic workers, with three library-related SOCs applied to all library workers. The narrow application of the three SOCs raises the possibility that all professional library staff will be counted together, separately from other staff, effectively ending the accurate representation of academic librarian FTE counts in the federal postsecondary dataset.[¶]

Most concerning about the transition, within the context of this discussion, is that IPEDS by default categorizes library staff as non-instructional staff, separate from institutional counts of instructional staff.¹² Faculty status is coded separately, across instructional and non-instructional staff, so IPEDS already effectively captures many types of academic instructors, regardless of faculty status. Institutions may technically have the discretion to reclassify staff, but the default categorization of library workers as non-instructional

§ For a full overview of SOCs, see “Standard Occupational Classification,” Bureau of Labor Statistics, accessed September 3, 2015, <http://www.bls.gov/soc>.

¶ The potential merging of librarian and non-librarian professionals in the national dataset is a separate and important issue that merits investigation given the anecdotal growth of non-librarian professionals in academic libraries.

staff could be interpreted as dissuading this type of discretionary reclassification. It is also symbolic of librarians' precarious status as teachers.

The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) has taken action to ensure stability of key data series, introducing a revised annual Academic Library Trends and Statistics Survey that restores instructional sessions and attendees, as well as the FTE measure and NISO-based occupational definitions for library workers.¹³ However, this data is decidedly less accessible than the NCES data. ACRL shares some past-year summary-level data, but recent data requires institutional subscription access.¹⁴ There is no open-access option for retrieving institution-level or comparative data, key features of IPEDS and ALS. With instructional and staffing data now uncoupled from the postsecondary setting and access restricted, academic librarians will be further alienated from one of the few data sources quantifying their instructional labor.

Our difficulties in quantifying the library instructional workforce have implications for how librarians and libraries conceptualize trends in library instruction and track and forecast staffing needs over time. We don't know how many academic librarians teach, and federal data collection efforts characterize librarians as separate from teachers, regardless of years of documented instruction sessions. We don't know if there are more teaching librarians now than there were at an earlier time. We don't know how the proportion of teaching librarians to non-teaching librarians has or hasn't changed over time. Because we don't know how many teaching librarians there are, we can't track workload (annual instruction sessions divided by teaching librarians per institution) over time or compare approximate institutional librarian teaching workloads or workforces.

Academic librarians—academic *teaching* librarians—spend a tremendous amount of energy as an occupational subgroup debating standards, metrics, values, and stereotypes but neglected to count themselves or track their own labor over time. This is an astonishing oversight within an institutional and sectoral context that exhaustively tracks teaching labor over time and quite handily documented the restructuring of teaching responsibilities in favor of non-tenure-track instructors. Teaching librarians aren't included in the national framework as instructional labor, and parallel tracking systems developed by academic library organizations to augment federal data collection do not collect these head counts either. In a broad library context (beyond academic libraries), quantifying teaching work in terms of personnel might seem superfluous, as everyone does everything and instruction is but one part of a larger service continuum. But in the postsecondary context, teaching is everything, and it is baffling that the instructional labor of librarians has not been tracked by anyone.

Librarians have long had an ill-defined relationship with their instructional role in the postsecondary setting. Teaching librarians experience multiple

competing demands—reference, teaching, collections, and committee assignments—that fragment attention and impact identity.¹⁵ Multiple demands were defined by Patterson and Howell in 1990 as too many competing responsibilities and not enough bodies teaching, and identified as the major contributing factor to teaching librarians' stress and burnout.¹⁶ Arguably more impactful to stress levels is an underlying belief and attitude in institutions that teaching librarians are not "real teachers" despite the undisputed fact of their teaching. Jane Kemp cataloged the range of arguments used to discount teaching librarians in 2006, including librarians' separation from teaching faculty, the role of the library as separate university unit, accusations of masquerading as teachers despite lack of disciplinary background, the insufficient nature of MLIS as terminal degree unless accompanied by subject degree, competing and inflexible schedules, lack of pedagogical training, and actual or potential workload impact on non-teaching librarians.¹⁷ Teaching librarians' deficit in pedagogical training has been well documented, as has the tendency of libraries to not require it.[†] Academic librarians who teach also tend to do more of it than they expected,[†] creating a dynamic of perpetual catch-up. Teaching librarians, developing as a subspecialty under stress, neglected basic self-care protocols and surrendered the externally recognized teaching role to adjacent professionals, while uneasily coexisting.

In 1998, sociologist Andrew Abbott characterized librarians' jurisdictional conflicts as inherent to evolving professional roles and contexts, and common to the development of all professions and sub-professions over time:

The system of professions is thus a world of pushing and shoving, of contests won and lost. The image of "true professionalism" notwithstanding, professions and semi-professions alike are skirmishing over the same work on a more or less level playing field. There is thus no sense in differentiating professions and semi-professions; they are all simply expert occupations finding work to do and doing it when they can.¹⁸

Andrew M. Cox and Sheila Corral used Abbott's description of librarianship as a federated profession that bumps against adjacent professions in their examination of emerging specialties in academic librarianship, including that

* Of librarians surveyed, 84 percent learned to teach on the job, according to Rebecca Albrecht and Sara Baron, "The Politics of Pedagogy: Expectations and Reality for Information Literacy in Librarianship," *Journal of Library Administration* 36, no. 1-2 (2002): 71-96.

† Forty percent have unanticipated teaching loads, according to Albrecht and Baron, "The Politics of Pedagogy"; unexpected teaching loads are also identified in Scott Walter, "Librarians as Teachers: A Qualitative Inquiry into Professional Identity," *College and Research Libraries* 69, no. 1 (2008): 51-71.

of the teaching librarian/IL instructor. For the teaching librarian, the move to the classroom represents an expansion of professional jurisdiction, creating the possibility of jurisdictional conflict with adjacent faculty and other institutional teachers.¹⁹ Some of this conflict can be traced to the conceptualization of the IL mission: instead of librarians claiming IL as the exclusive purview of teaching librarians, they issued objectives for the collective academic community to pursue regardless of reach and influence.²⁰ The instructional space of teaching librarians is shared, with varying degrees of coordination, recognition, or trust. However, the opportunities for conflict accompany just as many opportunities to collaborate and build solidarity as colleagues, based on shared values, functions, and grievances.

Non-tenure-track faculty (most frequently adjuncts) and graduate student workers in higher education are increasingly pushing back against inequalities in compensation and status in the face of their growing share of instructional labor. The push-back has taken the form of strategic and sometimes regional union organizing drives, coordinated media campaigns through advocate organizations, well-publicized collective actions like the one-day strike and other forms of work stoppages, and has garnered the growing support of tenure-track faculty on the institutional and national level.²¹ It is a moment rife with possibilities, with many ways for teaching librarians to support and stand with their co-teachers.

These possibilities have yet to be realized in terms of concrete organization and activity. In general, the labor activity of academic librarians is fragmented and tends to be institution-specific or within the framework of faculty identity (not a universal status among academic librarians). While there are some pockets of labor-related activity in the American Library Association (RUSA's AFL-CIO Labor Committee, ALA sister association ALA-APA's Salary and Status of Library Workers committee, and the SRRT-affiliated Progressive Librarians' Guild) and even a Labor section within the Special Libraries Association, there is no parallel labor-related subgroup in ACRL, even from a disciplinary perspective. No single union represents all library workers, much less academic library workers, and national coordination between unions is limited outside of the ALA-based committees. Librarian participation in the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) is mostly focused on the (worthy) topic of intellectual freedom or channeled through faculty identity, while the Community of Industrial Relations Librarians (CIRL) serves as a network of information professionals in industrial relations and human resources and is not specific to academia.

In keeping with these organizational tendencies and legacies, academic teaching librarians appear to be similarly reticent to engage in or support academic labor struggles as a defined cohort. While the intersection of an academic labor strike at the University of Toronto with a scheduled lecture by a

popular librarian author garnered extensive Twitter commentary,²² a corresponding crowdsourcing effort aimed at librarians generated fifty donations totaling around \$2000,²³ indicating a strong and vocal, but small, core of supporters.

Facing daunting barriers to organizing, teaching librarians can at least begin an accurate head count, to contextualize our place within the instructional labor force. We can advocate within ACRL and to ARL to reintroduce instruction data and have head counts of teaching librarians added to federal data collection or, if access is expanded, to the ACRL and ARL surveys. Academic libraries seeking to count their teaching staff can take the initiative to track this internally. Simply, in addition to tracking session count, also track the instructors who teach them.

Managers and coordinators can work to improve occupational cultures by talking about workload explicitly in teaching librarian venues, not just about workload as a feeling or in terms of individual impact, but as a structural or workforce issue. We can take the lead locally and nationally by harnessing the assessment project to identify sustainable workloads in terms of numbers (teachers and sessions), especially in relation to other librarian workloads like reference hours.

For individual academic teaching librarians, the critical task at hand is to self-organize as teachers in our libraries, regardless of faculty status or union membership. Only then can we effectively coordinate with other groups of teachers in the same institution intentionally, as a collective body. When adjuncts, contingent instructors, or faculty call for support and solidarity, we can respond collectively to support them. And in turn, we can ask for, and expect, solidarity as fellow teachers. Visibility brings recognition, but requires action, agency, and accountability from teaching librarians long hesitant to assert our role as academic instructional workers.

Notes

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